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# THE AMERICAN INSTITUTE OF SACRED LITERATURE

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## A PROFESSIONAL READING COURSE ON SIGNIFICANT MOVEMENTS IN RECENT THEOLOGICAL THOUGHT. IV

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### Theology and the Doctrine of Evolution

#### REQUIRED BOOKS

Lyman Abbott, *The Theology of an Evolutionist*.

James Y. Simpson, *The Spiritual Interpretation of Nature*.

Francis H. Johnson, *God in Evolution*.

Our previous studies have shown us that Christianity is a religion which is always in the process of growth. We have seen how the attempt to define its "essence" in terms of an unchanging content is being abandoned as we come to a better knowledge of the facts of its history. We are beginning to study even New Testament doctrine as the outgrowth of a complex historical situation, and to recognize that there were many sources of the religious ideas which found expression in early Christian preaching and teaching. In this final study we shall carry over into the field of modern religious thinking the point of view which has been developed in the previous sections.

Since the days of Darwin whole sciences have been revolutionized by the adoption of the principle of evolution. The idea has captivated the imagination of this generation, and is one of the most important aspects of our thinking to-

day. The only phase of modern life which might in any way be considered a rival in popular interest is the industrial question with its attendant problems of social welfare. Both of these realms of modern thought are so powerful that theology cannot ignore them. But while the social problem with its humanitarian demands has been able to find direct reinforcement in the spirit and content of the teachings of Jesus, the evolutionary conception has seemed to contradict certain doctrines which the Bible authorizes. If we believe in evolution our belief cannot in any sense be derived from biblical sources. For this reason it has presented an acute problem for Christian thinkers. We have selected it as an illustration for the very reason that we cannot here evade the ultimate question as to the actual way in which we construct our theological beliefs.

A word should be said concerning the history of theological opinion on this question during the past half-century. At first, when it was clearly seen that the doctrine of evolution was in contradiction to the picture of direct creation by divine fiat in the first chapters of

Genesis, theologians generally denounced the doctrine because it did not conform to the norm of truth which they were in the habit of using, viz., the statements of the Bible. But as the evidence grew in favor of the evolutionary conception, theologians began to attempt to recognize the facts without giving up their belief in the divine authority of scripture. For a time the favorite method employed was that of "harmonizing" the statements of Genesis with the statements of science. Such a harmony was made possible by a frankly allegorical interpretation of the statements of the Bible, according to which the literal meaning of the text was transformed into something more in accord with the demands of scientific accuracy. But such a makeshift could not long be satisfactory to anybody. The allegorized interpretations of Genesis were necessarily so vague that anyone who wanted definite information concerning evolution would go to scientific treatises, where he could find what he wanted directly stated without quibbling or evasion. While the method of "harmonization" brought some comfort to religious minds which did not want to be hurried too fast, its lack of exactness and its evasive way of coming to conclusions created in the minds of scientific men an unfortunate suspicion that theologians were more anxious to "save their face" than to discover the facts.

A more wholesome attitude toward the doctrine was inaugurated by two men who were thoroughly in sympathy with modern science, but who were also earnestly concerned for the welfare of religion. Professor LeConte published in 1889 a book entitled *Evolution and*

*Its Relations to Religious Thought*, in which he showed that the frank acceptance of the evolutionary position was quite compatible with a vital religious faith. Of more wide-reaching influence was Henry Drummond's *Natural Law in the Spiritual World*, which in 1883 took the principles of biological evolution and applied them to the elucidation of familiar Christian ideas. The way was thus opened for a positive use of the conception of evolution in the interpretation of Christianity. During the thirty years or more since the publication of Henry Drummond's book, the older attitude of theological opposition to the doctrine has gradually subsided; and the painstaking harmonizations of former days are now generally felt to be too cumbersome and too inexact. More and more the evolutionary conception has been admitted to a positive place in religious thinking, and efforts are now being constantly made to interpret the religious significance of the idea of development. The three books required in this study are typical of such efforts.

Lyman Abbott's *The Theology of an Evolutionist* represents the attitude of an intelligent pastor who does not claim a first-hand knowledge of the evolutionary doctrine, but who believes that it has come to stay in the thinking of intelligent men. To declare that a Christian must reject the doctrine of evolution would mean that many honest scientific thinkers would be excluded from any possibility of being counted as Christians. Abbott's book grew out of a series of addresses intended to show that the doctrine of evolution does not, as is often supposed, impair Christian

faith; but that on the contrary it furnishes positive contributory elements to a religious life.

The method of the book consists in taking the familiar doctrines of traditional theology, and asking what sort of an interpretation can be given to these doctrines by one who is a consistent believer in evolution. If we grant that everything which exists comes into existence by "continuous progressive change, according to certain laws and by means of resident forces," what may we say concerning creation, sin, redemption, inspiration, immortality, and other Christian doctrines? Abbott's replies to these questions are admirably adapted to meet the needs of the average Christian who knows his religious doctrines well, but who knows little about the doctrine of evolution; whose main desire is not a critical understanding of the scientific facts, but a way of preserving his religious assurance. The book shows how, if we believe that the one resident force controlling and causing everything is a spiritual Being, we can refer all events to the providential activity of this Being. In fact, God is brought nearer to us because we may see his action directly in all events, since he is actually immanent in the whole world-process. "There is no chasm of six thousand years between the evolutionist and his Creator. The evolutionist lives in the creative days and sees the creative processes taking place before him." Sin is the survival in us of brute traits which were developed on a lower level of evolution. Redemption means the emancipation of the spirit of man from the control of these lower powers, and his activity in the direction

of greater perfection. Christ stands as the complete revelation of the purpose of God, and enables us to understand completely the highest meaning of the evolutionary process which God is creatively sustaining. The end of life is to be Christlike. This means immortality, as well as high spiritual achievements here.

As was indicated above, Abbott's book represents the point of view of a layman in scientific matters. And from the scientific point of view it is lacking in exactness. "Evolution" means for Abbott an elastic and somewhat vague cosmic process in which anything may occur. Even miracles are possible if only we define them correctly. Miracles are simply unique events, while non-miraculous events are so often repeated as to be familiar. Thus Abbott is able to put into the process precisely the notions which he wants there. Hence the main tenets of the Christian system seem quite compatible with the principles of evolutionary process. The critical reader, however, will perhaps ask whether, if Abbott were not already supplied with the theology which he maintains, he would have found the tenets of this theology so well supported by the ascertainable facts in the evolutionary process. The immanent God in Abbott's evolutionary cosmos retains in the main the precise characteristics of the transcendent God of the pre-evolutionary theology. The essentials of the familiar "plan of salvation" remain, modified where necessary by the logic of the evolutionary conception. Abbott's work is edifying and practical; but it moves easily in the literary realm of imaginative exposition rather than

in the more exact pathways of accurate science.

Simpson's book, *The Spiritual Interpretation of Nature*, shows the influence of more exact scientific training. He is not content to deal with evolution in general terms. He wishes to know exactly what the content of evolution is from the point of view of biological science. He is careful to point out that the term "evolution" is so vague that it means almost nothing definite until we supply the content with the facts ascertained by observation and experiment. Evolution means really nothing more than the doctrine that everything occurs through "change with continuity." Just what the nature of any change is and just what is the character of the continuity can be determined only by observation and critical experimentation.

The bulk of the book is devoted to a detailed account of the conclusions of biology in its present stage of development. The reader is thus enabled to bring to the problem of religious thinking the same knowledge of facts which the scientist possesses. Moreover, in the opening chapters, Simpson suggests an attitude toward the realm of religion which is quite in accordance with the scientific spirit. He does not attempt to withdraw the field of religion from the reach of scientific criticism. He rather insists that science and religion are dealing with the same world, but from different points of view and with different purposes. Science is concerned to establish facts in their causal relation. Religion is concerned to discover and interpret the meaning of the world in relation to our spiritual life. The faith of the religious man, if it is a rationally

defensible faith, is not unlike the spirit of venturesome curiosity which constantly leads the scientist to try to enlarge the territory of his knowledge by conceiving possible interpretations of the world which may lack complete verification, but which are at least ways of exploration. Religion may be regarded as a courageous attempt to know more about the world and about our life in it than can be furnished by any non-religious way of inquiry.

On the basis of his careful account of the facts of biological evolution, Simpson attempts to show how religious faith may express itself without coming into conflict with the scientific spirit. If it be true that all our organs and our instincts are the result of the interrelation of organism with environment, it follows that any actual function of human life implies an objective correlate. "When finally we consider that man *is* a religious animal, we find it difficult to believe that there is nothing in the environment that elicits that particular characteristic." Religious faith will be entirely justified if it honestly and accurately seeks to ascertain all that may be known about the reality which stimulates us to religious activity. In the chapter on "The Directive Factor in Evolution," Simpson urges that since in our own life we are conscious of exercising purposive activity, and since nature yields to our purpose, we are justified in concluding that there is in the cosmic process itself a quality which is teleological. In other words, we are justified in believing in a divine purpose which directs the cosmic process.

Up to this point Simpson has consistently employed the inductive method.

He has started from the ascertainable facts, and has asked concerning the possibility of a spiritual interpretation of nature in the light of these facts. In the last chapters of the book he attempts to relate certain inherited Christian doctrines to the scientific interpretation of facts. Now some of the traditional doctrines were formulated in a pre-scientific age. Can they be adapted to the demands of scientific inquiry? It is questionable, for example, whether the word "creation," which inevitably suggests a definite beginning in time, is an appropriate word to use in connection with the idea of the immanent direction of a never-ceasing process. Simpson's discussion of miracles quite fails to examine the evidence with the thoroughness which is demanded by scientific exactness. No conclusion of any value is possible in the absence of certain exact details. If we cannot discover some analogous event which we may critically examine, we are helpless. Simpson assumes in the case of New Testament miracles an attitude of positive credence which he would not assume in the case of wonders recorded in pagan literature. In other words, he is here pursuing Abbott's method of bringing ready-made his conclusions, and finding a way to justify them.

Simpson's book is, on the whole, an admirable example of the use of the scientific spirit in the examination of religious problems. It betrays, however, in the latter portion, the pressure of the older theological ideal of "preserving the faith once delivered"; and in certain instances is more concerned to ask, "How can I make out a good case for this inherited belief which I

want to preserve?" than to ask, "What have I a right to believe in view of the facts?"

The third book, Johnson's *God in Evolution*, attempts to be consistently empirical. Johnson clearly sees the confusion which is sure to come in theological discussions if one continues to use "a mixed method in which two most divergent principles offset each other." On the one hand is the inherited belief that the surest foundation for religious belief lies in the fact that it has been authoritatively proclaimed in the Bible. But modern science has compelled us to abandon some biblical ideas. In such cases we believe what we believe on the basis of a study of the actual facts. We go to a modern geology rather than to the first chapter of Genesis if we want to know what to believe in regard to the origin and growth of our earth. We consult actual history to discover whether or not we shall affirm the New Testament belief concerning the speedy end of the world. But in certain other realms theologians hesitate to use the same method of consulting the facts. They would rather draw deductions from a single statement of Jesus concerning divorce than base conclusions on an inductive study of the actual facts today. They would rather devise specious arguments for retaining the historicity of biblical miracles than use precisely the same methods of criticism which we would employ in regard to a marvel related in non-biblical literature. Johnson insists that we shall never have a strong basis for our faith until we unify our theological method. We must consistently employ the inductive method, and let our beliefs in the realm

of religion, like our beliefs in every other realm, rest on the basis of critical examination of the facts at our disposal, rather than on the appeal to authority.

Johnson attempts to make use of this method in his book. The first application of it is the recognition of the fact that our inherited beliefs are the product of evolution. However we may be obliged to revise them, they represent genuine attempts to interpret realities of our experience. We have simply to give to them the same critical testing which we give to inherited theories in every other realm. Thus tested, the inherited belief in God proves to be indeed in need of revision. But the rejection of an anthropomorphic idea of God is no reason for jumping to the opposite conclusion that there is no God. Like Simpson, Johnson finds abundant reason for affirming a conscious power directing the evolutionary process.

But Johnson departs from both Abbott and Simpson in his method of discovering the character of God. He does not try to fit the picture of a transcendent God into the framework of an immanent process. He asks, "What does evolution testify as to the characteristics of the supreme, in-dwelling intelligence which it discloses?" After examination of the facts, he comes to the conclusion that God is not the omnipotent Absolute familiar to us in the treatises on theology. God is definitely limited in his activity by certain circumstances which we must recognize. God is thus like ourselves in that he has to make his way against obstacles. Religion thus means that God and man are working together for spiritual ends. In fact, the essence of religion may be put in the

Pauline formula, "Work out your own salvation; for it is God which worketh in you."

The main content of Johnson's book is devoted to the elaboration of various features of this conception of religion. The reader will perhaps feel that there is much rhetoric and considerable exuberant enthusiasm at some points where one would wish more sober and exact analysis. But one can discern throughout the discussion the outlines of a profound religious faith which shall make no appeal to external authority, but which shall simply interpret life in terms of the biological relationship which declares that all our activity is *activity in correspondence with environment*. Our spiritual life demands an interpretation of that environment which shall do justice to the facts of spiritual aspiration and achievement. The content of our doctrine concerning God must be related constantly to the facts of experience. If honesty requires us to abandon some honored doctrine, like that of the omnipotence of God, we should gladly do so, recognizing in theology as we do in all other branches of learning that the only reason for abandoning any theory is because we have found a better means of interpreting the facts. Johnson's actual system of doctrine is of less significance than is the recognition of the fruitful possibilities open to us if we adopt in our theological inquiry precisely the same method which we use in all other interpretations of reality. To develop confidence in this method, and to see that, instead of destroying faith, it makes possible the development of a faith suited to the precise problems of our modern life, is

perhaps more important than anything else for this generation of Christians.

Is it not high time for us to cease to allow a superior scientific method to be monopolized by those who are concerned to minimize the importance of the spiritual life by seeking to reduce everything to mere mechanism? Is not one great reason for the helplessness of many preachers and teachers today due to the fact that they have been simply repeating formulae of religion which are authoritatively furnished to them instead of thinking out the actual problems of religion and discovering the facts which make religion a necessity if we are to do justice to all phases of life? The acquirement of the ability to study religious problems in the spirit of scientific inquiry is indispensable to the vitality of religion itself today. When this attitude shall become more common, we may expect theology to become both interesting and inspiring to our age. The books studied in this course mark interesting aspects of the period of transition from the older to the newer method in theology.

#### ADDITIONAL LITERATURE BEARING ON THE SUBJECT

One should learn what the doctrine of evolution really is from strictly scientific works rather than from theologians, who usually have an apologetic purpose. Fortunately the literature here is abundant. We mention only a few reliable books, all of which are sufficiently free from technical terminology to be within the comprehension of the layman in science.

Osborn's *From the Greeks to Darwin* gives an illuminating history of the rise and growth of the evolutionary conception. —Denby's *Outlines of Biological Evolution* furnishes the important facts and

the prevailing theories in the realm of biology. —Kellogg and Jordan published *Evolution and Animal Life* for the distinct purpose of giving in popular form a reliable account of the state of biological science. —Darwin's great works, *Origin of the Species* and *The Descent of Man*, are of course indispensable to a thorough knowledge of the beginnings of the evolutionary theory. —Kellogg's *Darwinism Today* furnishes a valuable survey of recent development. —Cope's *The Primary Factors of Organic Evolution* is an excellent survey of facts. —On the philosophical side, Spencer's *First Principles* furnishes the idea around which much controversy has been waged. —The recent strikingly original interpretation found in Bergson's *Creative Evolution* has aroused widespread interest.

The attempts to bring theology into harmonious relations with the conception of evolution are also numerous. A few of the more significant are here mentioned. Drummond's *Natural Law in the Spiritual World* was a pioneer attempt to show how fruitfully the conceptions of evolution could be used. —LeConte's *Evolution in Relation to Religious Thought* also served to stimulate general confidence in the religious possibilities in the doctrine. —John Fiske's *Through Nature to God* is a popular exposition of the same theme. —Drummond's *The Ascent of Man* calls attention to certain teleological aspects of the biological history of man. —Newman Smyth set forth a readable cumulative argument for religion on the basis of the evolutionary theory in *Through Science to Faith*. —An unusually good book for popular reading is W. N. Rice's *Christian Faith in an Age of Science*. —An ambitious attempt to read the entire traditional Christian system in terms of the evolutionary theory is found in Griffith-Jones' *The Ascent through Christ*, which, however, stakes all on the belief that there are "breaks" in the evolutionary process, through which we may see special



divine activity.—A very suggestive presentation of the religious outcome of the doctrine of evolution is found in a catechism prepared by Sir Oliver Lodge, entitled *The Substance of Faith Allied with Science*.—Schmid's *The Scientific Creed of a Theologian* is the work of a German pastor who has an unusually wide knowledge of scientific works on evolution.

#### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Just what does the term "evolution" mean? Do preachers usually employ it in an accurate sense?
2. Why has there been so much opposition to the doctrine of evolution on the part of Christian thinkers?
3. If the conception of evolution is admitted into our religious thinking does it become an "essential" of modern Christianity, in the sense that it actually supplies material for faith?
4. What is the actual source of the doctrine that sin is the persistence of inherited animal instincts? Is it a development of the traditional doctrine of original sin, or has it an independent origin?
5. If we admit that the human species is descended from brute ancestry, what changes in the traditional doctrine of man follow?
6. Can a consistent evolutionist believe in miracles?
7. Is anything to be gained for religion by trying to establish "breaks" in the evolutionary process?
8. What changes in the conception of God are necessitated by the adoption of the evolutionary theory?

## SUGGESTIONS TO LEADERS OF CLASSES USING THE COURSE "THE MESSAGE OF JESUS TO OUR MODERN LIFE"<sup>1</sup>

### STUDY IV

#### CHRISTIAN INDIVIDUALISM

In this age of social awakening, moved by ideals of social service, and the call for definite expression of the great principle of the brotherhood of man, young men and women, carried away by enthusiasm, do not sufficiently, at times, emphasize the value of qualification for efficient service. Nor do they, by the study of their own especial capabilities, choose that particular phase of service which could best be rendered by them.

Self-forgetfulness is a noble quality. But to find out how one can best contribute to the welfare of society as a whole, and to prepare one's self to do that work, is a task no less self-denying. The people upon whose shoulders civilization and society have been carried forward from generation to generation have been persons of great individuality—men and women who were able to separate themselves from the mass in order better to study its needs and to

<sup>1</sup> These suggestions relate to the work of the fourth month of this course, the student material for which is contained in this number of the *Biblical World*. The whole course may be obtained in leaflets for use with classes by registered members of the Institute. Registration fee, 50 cents plus 4 cents postage. Address: THE AMERICAN INSTITUTE OF SACRED LITERATURE, The University of Chicago, Chicago, Ill.